

Assisted conception and Embryo Research with reference to the tenets of Catholic Christianity

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Abstract

Religion has a considerable influence over the public's attitudes towards science and technologies. The objective of the paper is to understand the ethical and religious problems concerning the use of embryo for research in assisting conception for infertile couples from the perspective of Catholic Christians. This paper seeks to explain our preliminary reflections on how religious communities particularly the Catholic Christian communities respond to and assess the ethics of reproductive technologies and embryo research. Christianity as a whole lacks a unified and definitive statement on when an embryo becomes a person, although fundamentalist Christians tend to be opposed to embryo experimentation. Roman Catholics tend to believe that the embryo should be treated as human life from the moment of conception or fertilisation. As opposed to this preconception I have tried to point out that a foetus is a clump of cells and lacks individuality as a conscientious human being and thus can be used for research for therapeutic reason.

The paper concluded that the Church accepts techniques on embryo that respect their life. So they would allow procedures that are akin with healing and improvement of life without involving undue risks. The Church feels children should arise out of act of love between man and his wife in co-operation with God. In this regard, it may be pointed out though the creation of a child through a conjugal act in a wed lock is the preferred method since it is the most natural, least expensive one. But that does not mean, it should be the only acceptable means to conception. To state a child born using ARTs would be less perfect compared to a child born through conjugal act of husband and wife is absurd one to be mentioned.

KEYWORDS: Embryo Research, Catholic Christianity

The main tenet of the Church is, "The life of every human being must be recognized and safeguarded from the moment of conception."¹ The other Christian religious group maintain that an individual human being does not attain personhood or gains life not at the moment of conception or fertilisation but instead develops from a later starting point. So it may be found that Christians are divided in their opinion about when human life comes into being. But invariably all Christian tradition considers Bible for basic religious truths. Many also turn to the historical Christian traditions which have incorporated the early teachings of Church fathers and councils and the later moral and theological commentaries. Some of the Catholic Christians look forward to the religious teachings of church leaders who they believe are considered to have special access to divine truth. Many Christian traditions with a varying degree acknowledge importance of reason and experience in understanding religious concepts. The importance or weight given to different Christian religious resources may vary from one Christian denomination to another. But to the mainstream

Christian Bible is held in high esteem and is considered as a holy book with richly varied sorts of passages of historical description of events, stories, commandment, moral instruction and parables. For Christians, these ‘Scripture’ books are commonly referred to as the Old and new Testaments.

In a general sense, catholic views about assisted reproductive technologies or embryo experimentation is an excellent example of Catholic moral reasoning. Such reasoning, proceeds from an ‘is’ or ‘fact’ to one or more ‘ought’ or moral judgement². The Church begins its exploration of the implications of the ‘is’ of the human person, and the ‘is’ of the nature of human conjugal relationship, to reveal the ‘ought to’ regarding proposed methods of human procreation. In fact the Catholic dogma states of three leading principles in the context of procreation and family. *Firstly*, the Church demands the protection of human being from the moment of its conception. The *second principle* commands the duty of procreation in a heterosexual relationship. But the Catholic Church condemns bearing of child out of wedlock. The new-born has to embody the love between a husband and wife and the child a fruit of their eternal union. The *third principle* is about the integrity and dignity norms associated with assisted reproductive ethics. Talking of dignity, the Church has put forward the moral teaching corresponding to the dignity of the person and to his or her integral vocation³. The criteria for moral judgement concerning the dignity of the human person are threefold: 1) respect for the human person 2) ‘Right to life’ for every human being and 3) transcendent aspects of the human as ‘person’ inclusive of human soul and humanity’s destiny in communion with God.

The creation story in Genesis 1:26, declares that human beings were created in “the image of God”. The Church propagates that God created human being in his own likeness. The Church also believes that God created human being not out of need but out of love. This implicates that human beings are the only creature whom God has “wished for himself”⁴. Human identity seems to have been elevated when Jesus came to Earth and partook the human form. The Church emphasizes that the human body is a fundamental condition for human life and for human destiny, eternal communion with God.⁵ The human body is a part and parcel constituting person that manifests and expresses himself through the body. Thus the body would always merit physical respect.

Moving from the essential nature of the human person let us now shift our focus to the Christian perspective of the embryo.

Christian views on the moral status of embryo

Christianity as a whole lacks a unified and definitive statement on when an embryo becomes a person, although fundamentalist Christians tend to be opposed to embryo experimentation. Roman Catholics tend to believe that the embryo should be treated as human life from the moment of conception or fertilisation. The Psalm (Psalm 139: 13—16a) reads:

For it was you who formed my inwards parts;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb...
my frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

In your book were written all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.

This stanza states how a formless something evolves into completeness and fullness. Some views it as depicting an individual human being which gets evolved at the moment of conception, as God has formed him in the womb and knew him there. Thus it may be drawn that embryos constitute individual human beings from the time of their formation. The Church is inclined to admit that right from the time of fertilisation embryo begins its adventure of a human life. They point out that the embryo cannot grow and made to be human, if it were not human already. But a group of Christian theological commentators conclude that biblical texts alone are incapable to resolve the dispute whether early embryos are individual human beings and if they are susceptible for protection. In this context, Gilbert Meilander, a Conservative Christian scholar observes, “We cannot, I think claim that the Bible itself establishes the point at which an individual life begins, although it surely directs our attention to the value of foetal life.”⁶. The Church though has not definitively spoken on when the soul comes into being. But it insists that the life of every human being must be valued and safeguarded from the moment of conception.

Now if we consider the scientific and metaphysical views of Aristotle, we would find in Aristotle’s embryology, the embryo grows from an initial formless mass. In the initial stage, the embryo develops a nutritive or vegetative soul that enables nourishment. In the next stage, it develops a sensitive or animal soul that enable the development of organs required for sensation, and finally a rational or intellectual soul for reasoning. Aristotle did not consider the rational soul as an immaterial spirit but, rather, as the animating principle that forms and actualizes the embryo. Early Christian theologians have the reflection of Aristotle’s ideas of distinction between the unformed embryo, which was not considered human and the formed embryo which was considered human.

Even during the Medieval Ages, the Western Christian thought was influenced by this distinction of formed and unformed embryos. Thomas Aquinas, a Christian theologian of thirteenth century reflected that embryo does not possess a human and rational soul from its conception but a kind of soul necessary for growth and development common to all forms of life. He believes that the embryo grows to take human form, the human soul enters, transforming it into an individual human being. Though, Aquinas does not accept that the killing of early embryo tantamount to homicide yet like Thomas Augustine regards that any action that brings about the death of the unformed embryo to be a serious moral lapse on a par with the use of contraception for it is a hindrance to the procreative process of conjugal act. The dilapidation of the unformed embryo was considered morally wrong not because it is a form of homicide but because it interferes with procreative process. At the same time the destruction of formed embryos tantamount to homicide for it is a destruction of the future man, as viewed by the Roman Catholic theologians. Some criticised that the moral views concerning the death of embryos rested on precarious scientific grounds. Many Christian theologians began to give emphasis on the ensoulment of the embryos. This means that the embryos are treated at par with human beings who have soul. ‘The soul’, an immaterial “something”, endows a human being with an intellect, emotions, a will, and an autonomous ‘sense of self.’ The Christian theologians used to give greater credence to the notion of immediate human ensoulment at the conception.

In this regard, mention may be made of the affirmation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary by Pope Pius IX as an article of faith in 1854. According to this canon Mary was bereft of sin from her conception, this means she must have been ensouled at the time of conception, rather than ninety days later. But this same Pope Pius IX in later years states that the punishment meted out for the destruction of formed and unformed embryos would be the same—excommunication. So the distinctions between formed and unformed embryos are turning blurred. The distinction no longer holds significance in the Roman Catholic canon. Since the distinction got diffused in the later Christian tradition, it became difficult to point out any particular stage which we can identify as the moment when the soul is infused. In fact, the Roman Catholic Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith observed that there is no unanimous tradition regarding the time of ensoulment and authors are still in disagreement⁷.

Quickening, the time when the mother first feels the foetus move was thought in the traditional Catholic religion, the moment when the embryo gets ensouled. But this idea of soul being infused into the embryo is an outmoded piece of superstition. So quickening is the time when the foetus is felt to move on its own accord. But ultrasound studies shows that even before the moment of quickening, when the foetus is first felt to move, the foetus remains alive. In fact, the foetus start moving as early as six weeks after fertilisation, long before they can be felt to move. So whether the embryos move or not, it has nothing to do with the embryo's claim for continued life. This is because a paralysed person with a disability to movement continues living.

Actually it would be absurd to claim that the early embryo is a human being since human beings are individuals and the early embryo is not even an individual. It is to be noted that an early embryo have the capacity to split into two or more genetically identical embryos, at any time up to about 14 days after fertilisation. And these identical embryos lead to the formation of identical twins. So, when we have an existence of embryo prior to this formation of twins, it would be doubtful whether it is the predecessor of one or two individuals. Thus it becomes quite dicey for those who claim continuity of human existence from conception to adulthood.

So, the claim of the Roman Catholic, that embryos are potential human being and thus should not be harmed, seem untenable. The foetus is not an actual human being. The foetus is a clump of cells, though it may be living, but it is like other living cells of a woman body. It is more like a seed or a sprout of a human being. Just like an egg is not a chicken or a silkworm not a dress, so do a foetus or an embryo not a human being. Also if we consider foetus a human being, he or she is not legally a person and therefore is not entitled to the same sentient, rational being enjoy --- mainly the right to life. So long an early embryo that has not yet been implanted into the uterus does not have the psychological, emotional or physical properties that we associate with being a person. Therefore we may be entitled to use it for the benefit of patients who are persons. Before 14 days of conception, the embryo has no central nervous system and therefore no senses. Compared to adult tissue, foetal tissues or cells appears to grow better after transplantation and is less likely to be rejected. So research or experimentation done on embryo could led to the hope of finding cures for many serious illness by the transplantation of cells from the embryo.

A foetus or an embryo cannot have the capacity to exercise choice of their own; they cannot be considered an autonomous being. Other research suggest that prior to 18

weeks from fertilisation, the embryo is unable to be harmed. Prior to 18 weeks, the cerebral cortex of embryo is not sufficiently developed for synaptic connections to take place within it. That is the embryo has not the capacity or signals to feel pain as is present in any adult human being. Fertilisation thus itself is a process not a 'moment'. So an embryo in its earliest level is not clearly defined as an individual. Fertilized human eggs are just parts of other people's bodies until they have developed enough to survive independently. Suppose a blastocyst is destroyed before its implantation into the womb, it is not subjected to be harmed as it has no beliefs, desires, expectation, aims or purposes as could be found in any adult human being.

Assisted reproductive technologies and Christianity

To the Church human conjugal relationship has both a uniting and procreative dimension. The physical bond between the couples as a result of greater love reflects unitive dimension. The procreative element of human conjugal relationship has a transcendental element. It is like sharing God's creative generativist. That is to say, it has the mystery of personal communion and helps in creation. The coming together of man and woman for procreation includes openness to the richness of life which the child represents. If human person represents a unity of body and soul, human marriage should also reflect this unity. According to the Catholic teachings marriage reflects the love of God not only to the children of the marriage, but also to the world. In a way marriage should have the glimpse of unconditional love that God has for human persons, a love that is total, permanent and unlimited. Marriage according to the natural law theology is a true communion where each spouse completely open to the other in mutual self giving. According to the natural law theory of marriage, marriage is held to be a permanent association between a man and woman with the intention to nourish the bond of conjugal love and enable procreation and education of children.⁸ The Church feels that nobody's dignity should be sacrificed while producing an offspring. For no one has a right to another person, we are gifts to one another, not obligations.⁹

About embryo experimentation or assisted reproductive technologies, the Church has a particular standpoint. The Catholic requirement of conjugal sex for procreation results in a resounding 'no' to all assisted reproductive technologies. To state clearly, marriage actually provides companionship and provides sexual fulfilment and leads to procreation. But the Church or the Catholic Christianity does not rank these purposes in any particular order and, therefore, none should be overemphasized or purposely de-emphasized. The Church prohibits fulfilment of intimate companionship, sexual fulfilment or childbearing outside marriage. To the Church, baby making in any relationship other than marriage is not justified. They believe that the use of medical technology in order to bear children violates God's natural law of procreation. Natural law theology does not separate procreation from the conjugal act of love. The Roman Catholic Church strictly abides by this law. As the laws of Scripture states that the sexual act is reserved for marriage only so babies cannot be conceived outside of marriage. Embryo experimentation or assisted reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilisation, intra-cytoplasmic sperm injection and zygote intra fallopian transfer which involves embryo fertilised outside of the human body is reinserted in the woman's womb, involve penetration of the egg by the sperm outside of the human body. Now, according to the Church's judgement the child got out of marriage and through these technologies is deprived of unitise aspect, the spiritual and physical union of the parents. The child is not the result of a communion of persons in love.

The Church feels procreation taking place with the assisted reproductive technologies is deprived of the message that a man and a woman communicate to one another when they engage in human sexual intercourse. Procreation through assisted reproductive technologies has the domination of rubric and standards of scientific technology over the influence and efficiency of nature. The child yielded through embryo experimentation or assisted reproductive technologies lack the “fully human” communion which involves meeting of the spirit and sense of man and woman.

The Church disapproves of the method of homologous artificial insemination leads to conception with the aid of the couple’s own sperm and egg and fertilisation being taken place outside or inside the body of woman. The Church is against this method as they feel that homologous artificial insemination separates the unitive and procreative goods of sexual communion. The Christian accepts three main principles concerning assisted reproductive technologies. They are:

- 1) The embryo is a human being from the moment of conception and that they are susceptible to the reverence that we need to show to the beings that are created by God or are image-bearers of the God.
- 2) Heterosexual monogamous marriage is ordained in the Catholic Christianity. Children begotten or produced out of wedlock especially heterosexual marriage relationship is strictly prohibited.
- 3) The relationship between an offspring and his or her parents is sacrosanct and that relationship need to be encouraged and protected.

It is in this light, we may consider these above three principles of Christianity concerning embryo experimentation particularly assisted reproductive technologies which are baby producing procedures.

In case of surrogacy, apart from the husband and wife a third party is being drawn into the intimate marriage relationship. This violates the sacrosanct monogamous heterosexual relationship between man and woman. Here the Church would like to raise the possibility of threat that surrogacy pose to the institution of marriage. The Church feels if a woman becomes a surrogate mother she is reduced to a mere incubator. If the surrogate mother is the genetic mother, then she has to suppress maternal feelings for her baby and have to hand over the baby to the commissioning parents. Even those mothers who are not genetically mother but are birth giving mother develops a bond with her baby during prenatal stage wherein the bond does not diminishes. But the mother has to suppress her maternal feelings. Though the surrogate mother does a selfless act by conceiving and bearing a child for a childless couple, yet in surrogacy the mother-child relationship appears fragile and is easily broken. The Christian thinks surrogacy does not uphold and honour the maternal relationship.

Apart from surrogacy, there are other means by which couples conceive outside marriage, through artificial insemination. In case of artificial insemination, the male donor sperm are used to fertilise women’s ovum. The Christian principles regarding embryo experimentation or assisted reproductive technologies are not violated if the husband donates his sperm to his wife. But when a donor’s sperms are used to fertilise

another woman, it violates the sacred law of marriage. Inclusion of a third party between the husband and wife breaks the marriage covenant. Beside artificial insemination enabled a man to procreate without being responsible for his child's nurture. God's creation order states that fathers and mothers should care and nurture their off springs and not merely receive intellectual gratification in procreating alone.

Now the question arises whether embryo transfer or better still gamete intra fallopian transfer violates the Church's principles of procreation and conception. Embryo transfer leads to the technique called gamete intra fallopian transfer. In the gamete intra fallopian transfer techniques the embryos or gametes of a donor woman are transferred in the woman's fallopian tubes where fertilization may take place. In this technique the woman may carry the child to term using the donor woman's gamete or embryo. This method in a way may pass the benchmark set by Church with respect to procreation. The Church had to say, "If the technical means facilitate the conjugal act or helps it to reach its natural objectives, it can be morally acceptable."¹⁰

In the method called IVF, the gametes of husband and wife is used and the marriage promises are not broken. But sometimes in case of IVF, improperly developing embryos are thrown away. The Church accepts techniques on embryo that respect their life. So they would allow procedures that are akin with healing and improvement of life without involving undue risks. The Church prohibits experimentation and fertilisation of embryos outside woman's body, which may pose risk to the continuing life of the embryo, the risk being inherent in the experimental procedure themselves. The Catholic Christian Church proposes to prohibit cryopreservation of embryos, embryo donation for experimentation and research (irrespective of research being beneficial to the treatment of diseases), killing of the spare embryos. In IVF, several ova are fertilised and placed in the woman's womb for enhancing the chances of successful implantations but it leads to multiple pregnancies in some cases. So to reduce risk of multiple pregnancies all but one or two of the unborn infants are killed. This procedure is called foetal reduction. Foetal reduction is considered by some to be necessary for they feel it's better to have one or two surviving infants than none at all. Foetal reduction may lead to killing of embryos. The Christian principles state that sovereignty over life and death belongs to God. Based on this principle foetal reduction though a reasonable method to reduce multiple pregnancy, yet would not be acceptable to the Christians. The ethicists point out foetal reduction from the utilitarian standpoint is a feasible choice or option. The ethicist states that, 'it is better to save some (potential) lives than lose them all'¹¹

Conclusion

In a nutshell, it may be pointed out that the Church's response to modern technological intervention is not warm. The Church view is that a child has a right to be the result of God's design, produced out of love between husband and wife in a marriage communion. Pulling conception out of its context and de-personalizing it is going against God's law. To them trusting God and working within his laws is the way to approach any challenge we are presented with in life. The Church feels children should arise out of act of love between man and his wife in co-operation with God. In this regard, it may be pointed out though the creation of a child through a conjugal act in a wed lock is the preferred method since it is the most natural, least expensive one. But that does not mean, it should be the only acceptable means to conception. To state a child born using ARTs would be less perfect compared to a

child born through conjugal act of husband and wife is absurd one to be mentioned. Those couple with serious medical conditions would be always left in the lurch and continue to be childless if we accept the Church's standpoint. Should infertile Catholics supposed to be detained from treating a medical condition which would deter them from building or expanding their family? Though adoption is a wonderful option recommended by the Church, it should never be forced on anyone. It is to be noted that babies born of IVF are able to see the light of the world because their parents longed for, loved and respected these children even before their conception. Though these children may not have been born out of conjugal love of their parents, yet it took a deep love, respect and commitment to pursue the medical treatment needed to conceive a child and beget using the aid of ARTs. It would be incredible to think that science can create magic for all couples to procreate through conjugal act. There may be couples waiting years, even decades for science to make such advancement. For these couples, science can at least help to procreate through artificial means. The challenge for the Church would be to view the beauty in the science and that there is a path with these artificial means of reproduction worth of God's grace and approval. If the Church couple provide any other alternative method for the infertile couple to conceive then that would have been welcome, but the Catholic Church offers infertile couples no alternative. If a Church holds that any human being born is susceptible to respect and honour, then every child, no matter how that child is born would be precious in God's eyes. In fact there is 'naturalness' behind any couples desire to have children --- We've grown up in such a loving caring environment that it is just a natural feeling for us to want have children.¹². The Church with their positive participation could help in limiting and minimising risks associated with the assisted reproductive technologies. The Church could help in limiting abuses and disregard for human life through advocacy, education and support.

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